

BE HOLY FOR I AM HOLY

WHY IS HOLINESS IMPORTANT, HOW
IS HOLINESS ATTAINED, AND WHAT
DOES HOLINESS LOOK LIKE?

360-DEGREE HOLINESS

CHAMBERLAIN HOLINES LECTURES

REVD DR C T SAMUEL

9 OCTOBER 2012

INTRODUCTION

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am Holy (Lev 19.2).

Holiness is a complex issue. Christians know that we ought to be holy and yet we know we are sinful. We know that we are meant to be holy but disagree on what holiness looks like, how it is attained and how far we can truly be holy in this life. We know that to pursue holiness is our responsibility and yet we know that we cannot become holy unless the Holy One makes us holy. We know that we are meant to be holy but we are unsure what the word holy means.

I would like to spend a few moments today unpacking the words of Leviticus 19.2: 'You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.' In exploring the Idea of the Holy we shall explore 3 questions. First, Why is holiness important? Second, How is holiness attained? Third, What does holiness look like?

WHY IS HOLINESS IMPORTANT?

The concern with holiness is something that we find across the pages of the Bible. In the Old Testament we find this concern expressed in the sacrificial system and purification laws. This is especially the case in Leviticus where we find not only the command to be holy but also all sorts of laws to enable people to be holy in the presence of God. Indeed, the pursuit of justice in Leviticus is understood be an outworking of the holiness of God's people. Similarly, among the OT prophets, especially Elijah, Isaiah, Amos and Ezekiel we find a consistent call to

holiness which requires justice. The Book of Job is very much concerned with the question of holiness, both Job's holiness and God's. The Psalms begin and end with the question of holiness. Psalm 1 begins blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly... while Psalm 150 ends with praise in the sanctuary of the Holy One of Israel. Tomorrow we will spend some time exploring models of holiness in the Old Testament

In the New Testament the concern with holiness continues. We find it in the ministry of Jesus in the Gospels, for example in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, not least the declaration in Matthew 5.48 that we should be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. Similarly in the NT Epistles, whether of Paul in Thessalonians and Romans, or of Peter, or of the anonymous writer to the Hebrews, we find a repeated and consistent call us to holiness. Over the next few days we will explore holiness in the letters of Paul and in the Gospels.

It seems pretty clear me, at least, that Scripture is very much concerned with the question of holiness. Nonetheless, the question yet remains, 'Why is holiness important?

Holiness is important because it is important to God. I suggest that holiness is important to God, not because it is God's hobby but because it is at the heart of who God is. Hear the words of Leviticus 19.2 once again: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.'

When God says I am holy it is not like me saying I am tall, dark and handsome because whilst this may be true it is only one facet of my character. No when God says I am holy it is much closer to what I mean when I say I am Calvin. When I say that, I am not merely telling you what I am called, rather I am trying to tell you who I am.

Holiness, similarly, is not merely one of God's characteristics; rather it is who God is. Holiness is the quintessential nature of God; it is the core God's very being. Walter Moberly argues that 'holy' is tantamount to a definition of the nature of YHWH.¹ Christopher Wright concurs, 'Holiness is the biblical "shorthand" for the very essence of God.'² John Hartley states it more stridently: 'Holiness is not one attribute of Yahweh's among others; rather it is the quintessential nature of Yahweh as God. ...Holiness thus distinguishes Yahweh from all other creatures.'³ Hartley continues, 'In the entire universe ... [Yahweh] alone is intrinsically holy.'⁴

This, I suggest, is the primary reason why holiness is important, for when we seek after holiness we seek far more than to be lovely Christian people; we seek far more than to be committed to justice; we seek far more than to be people of integrity. Rather, much more importantly, when we seek after holiness, we seek nothing less than to become like God.

¹ R W L Moberly, '“Holy, Holy, Holy”: Isaiah's Vision of God,' *Holiness Past & Present* Ed. S C Barton, (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 127.

² Christopher J H Wright, *Living as the People of God*, (Leicester: IVP, 1983), 27.

³ John Hartley, *Leviticus*, (Dallas: Word, 1992), lvi.

⁴ Hartley, 312.

HOW IS HOLINESS ATTAINED?

Having sketched why holiness is important we need to ask how is holiness attained? This is a paradox. On the one hand, holiness is beyond our reach. If holiness is intrinsically who God is, humans can, therefore, be holy only if God makes us holy.

A great scriptural example of this is the story of Moses meeting with God at the burning bush in Exodus 3.5. God declares: take off your shoes for the ground you are standing on is holy ground. Why was the ground holy? I can't be absolutely sure about this but I suspect, that the ground was not holy because it had said the sinner's prayer, confessed its faith in Jesus Christ and sought after a second definite work of grace, a second blessing of holiness.

Rather the ground was holy simply because God was present and God's holiness, as it were, infected the very ground. Something rubbed off. Similarly humans can be holy only if God renders us holy. Metaphorically speaking, we need something to rub off from God onto us, if we are to have any hope of being holy. Holiness is a work of grace. God has to do it or else it is not grace.

And yet, on the other hand, holiness is not merely a passive pursuit. Note what Leviticus declares: "You shall be holy." It is a command. It is a directive. We are instructed to be holy. Now what this indicates is that holiness is not only about God's gift grace; it is also about human pursuit.

This is the paradox of holiness. We cannot become holy unless God shares God's holiness with us, renders us holy by the grace of God; and yet we never become holy apart from striving, seeking, working, and pursuing the Holy One.

Leviticus does not merely instruct Israel to be holy; it also gives clear indications of what this might involve. Interestingly, little of what follows in Leviticus 19 is airy-fairy stuff. Certainly there are instructions about sacrifices to be offered, but most of it refers to how we love our neighbours as ourselves, especially those who are poor and powerless.

For example, v9: When you reap the harvest you must leave gleanings for the poor and the alien; v13 you must not defraud your neighbour or keep for yourself a labourer's wages until morning; v14 gives instructions about treating those living with a disability with dignity; v20 protection for female slaves from exploitation by their masters. Moreover, if we read carefully we find that much of Lev 19 is a restatement of the 10 commandments of Exodus 20.

1. HAVE NO OTHER GODS (4;31)
2. DO NOT WORSHIP IDOLS (4)
3. DO NOT PROFANE GOD'S NAME (12)
4. KEEP THE SABBATH (3;30)
5. HONOUR YOUR PARENTS (3;32)
6. DO NOT STEAL (11;13)
7. DO NOT MURDER (17-18?)
8. DO NOT COMMIT ADULTERY (20-21)
9. DO NOT LIE (11)
10. DO NOT COVET (20-25?)

It is also in Leviticus that we find the raw material for Jesus' declaration that we should love our neighbours as ourselves (v18). Indeed I believe that Jesus was a

great reader of Leviticus; when Jesus taught that it is not enough not to commit murder we also are not to hate in Matt 5; that was not an original idea we find it here in 19.17. When Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 that too is not original; we find instructions to love the alien in 19.34.

Leviticus does not merely instruct Israel to be holy; it also gives clear indications of expected behaviour in everyday life. Holiness in Leviticus is not an abstract theoretical doctrinal concept. It is a lived experience of the grace of God.

So how is holiness attained? That is the million dollar question; it is the one to which we are keen to know the answer. Holiness is a paradox. On the one hand holiness is a gift bestowed by God's grace and yet, on the other hand, is never attained without obedience to God's word. It is not coincidental that Leviticus 19.2 is followed by so many detailed practical moral instructions.

WHAT DOES HOLINESS LOOK LIKE?

Having determined that holiness is important and having discovered that holiness is on the one hand a gift bestowed by God's grace and yet requires obedience to God's Word, we have yet to ask what does holiness look like? This is an important question because unless we have some idea of what holiness looks like then how will we recognise it when we see it? How will we know whether we have attained it?

So what does holiness look like? This answer to this question is both very simple and very complex. If it is true that holiness is God's quintessential nature, the very core of who God is then the answer to the question is mind-numbingly simple. What does holiness look like? It looks like God. To be holy is to be godly. To be holy is to value what God values, to speak as God would speak, to reflect God's very being.

A great example of this we find in the story of Moses being in the presence of God on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34.29ff. Having spent so much time with God Moses descends from his mountaintop experience with his face so irradiated with the glory of God that he had to wear a veil for the next few weeks, perhaps months, until it came back to normal. Similarly, holiness is to reflect God's person and glory.

But this is where it moves from mind-numbing simplicity to mind-aching complexity for who knows what God looks like? You may have heard the story of a child busily at work drawing a picture. His mum asked him what he was drawing. He replied, I am drawing a picture of God. His mum said, Really? But nobody knows what God looks like. The child replied, "They will, when I'm finished."

What does God look like? We don't know for sure; and yet we are not left clueless. God sent Jesus to give us some clues as to who God is and what holiness looks like. To be holy is to be like Christ, for he is the ultimate example

of human holiness. What did he indicate? Jesus taught many things but perhaps most importantly he taught by his actions, not least his actions on the cross.

What Jesus demonstrates is that to be holy, then is to love our neighbours as ourselves; it is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength and mind and to give ourselves completely over to God even if it leads to suffering and death. What does holiness look like? Holiness looks like God; holiness looks like Christ.

However, if holiness looks like God and God is invisible then holiness also is invisible. If you come from the same strand of holiness tradition that I come from that is problematic because there were many who wanted holiness to be visible. So we became very legalistic. Holiness became a list of prohibited behaviours.

Ultimately, however, like God, holiness is invisible. However, though God is invisible we may nonetheless see evidence of God's presence. Similarly, holiness though invisible is evident in the continuing transformation by grace. In traditional Wesleyan language, sanctification is growth in grace and holiness. Holiness becomes visible through continuing transformation by God's grace.

This idea of growth in holiness implies that we are growing towards an end. Put another way holiness is possible here and now and yet it is also the ultimate end of relationship with God which is not fully consummated until the end of the age. Here we touch on the inherently eschatological nature of holiness. 1 John 3.2 puts

it this way: ‘what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed we will be like him.’

So what we have in human experience of holiness, then, is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, a glimpse of the future, a deposit of what is to come, and the first fruits of the harvest of the end of the age. This perhaps helps to explain the eschatological ‘now and not yet’ nature of holiness. First fruits are indeed real fruit but not the whole of the harvest. A deposit is hard cash in hand but only a fraction of the due sum. A foretaste and a glimpse are genuine experiences of tasting and seeing but are inevitably frustrating in their fleetingness. So it is with human experience of holiness through the Spirit; holiness is of this age but primarily of the age to come. The pursuit of holiness is thus to seek to experience the age to come breaking into our present age.

CONCLUSION

The scripture declares as he who has called you is holy you shall be holy. This is not an optional extra it is a call to a holy life for all who are the people of God. Because holiness is the heart of who God is, holiness has to be the heart of who we are as God’s people. If holiness is the heart of God’s very being we must resist the temptation to reduce the human pursuit of holiness to a simplistic super-spirituality. Holiness is complex; it is costly, often requiring working out in pain.

Holiness is complex not least because we know there is nothing that we can do to make ourselves more holy because holiness is all of God. Holiness properly is a descriptor of God alone. People, spaces, objects or times which are described as holy can only be so because they in some way relate or belong to the Holy One.

At the same time we also know that holiness is never attained without effort, discipline, or obedience, without seeking, hungering and thirsting for righteousness on our part. Thus holiness remains a mystery. Often we do not recognise ourselves to be holy but others are able to see evidence of God's grace in us. When Moses' face was aglow with glory of God in Exodus 34.29ff, he could not see it but everybody else could. One reason for this is that the more we grow in grace and holiness the more we become aware of our sinfulness and of our ongoing need for sanctification, for God's holy ones are not incapable of sin; holy people can and do sin.

So we return to those words of Leviticus: "You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy. How far is this true of our experience as a Christian community? How far is this our individual experience? Let us make that journey together. Let us dare to ask God to sanctify us by the power of the Spirit that we might truly be holy as God is holy. Amen.